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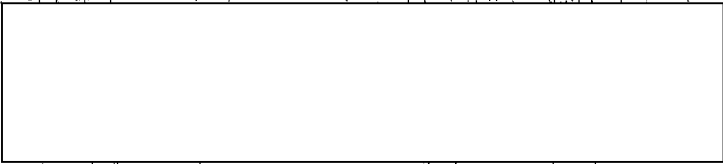
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The Soviet Leadership Balance and Afghanistan

An Intelligence Assessment

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The Soviet Leadership Balance and Afghanistan

An Intelligence Assessment

*Research for this report was completed
on 31 January 1980.*

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The Soviet Leadership Balance and Afghanistan

Key Judgments

The decision to intervene in Afghanistan has raised the question—as all major Soviet decisions have in the past—of the degree of consensus that existed among the leadership on this action. It has also prompted speculation that President Brezhnev—the Kremlin's strongest advocate of detente—is no longer a leading force in Soviet policymaking.

On balance we believe that Brezhnev remains the dominant force within the Politburo and was directly involved in and supportive of the decision to invade Afghanistan. Measuring the level of enthusiasm within the Soviet hierarchy for military action is more difficult. We suspect there were some reservations, but we believe these concerns did not extend to fear for the future of detente, a policy with which the leadership was increasingly disenchanted during the closing months of 1979.

Public statements by Soviet leaders about Afghanistan before the invasion occurred revealed little more than a common concern with developments there. Party ideologist Suslov, who has often spoken out favorably about revolutionary processes in the Third World, implied that Afghanistan was a Communist state worth preserving. This could mean that he was in the vanguard of those favoring intervention.

Premier Kosygin

almost certainly did not play an active part in the Afghan decision. His counsel probably would have been on the side of caution, and his absence from office probably facilitated the choice for military action.

Because the temper of the Politburo as a whole shifted away from detente, however, it seems unlikely that Kosygin's presence would have altered the decision. Despite this shift, we have not detected a basic realignment of power within the Politburo. In November, an opportunity to replace Kosygin was allowed to pass; he is still being ranked second in the Soviet pecking order. Instead of retiring Kosygin, the Politburo brought in a 74-year-old Brezhnev loyalist, First Deputy Premier Tikhonov. We have no reason to believe that Tikhonov's promotion, in itself, altered the balance within the Politburo on foreign policy issues.

The USSR's leaders must have taken their positions on the intervention with an eye on their relative standing in a post-Brezhnev political environment. To the extent that the intervention has undercut detente policies—with which most Soviet leaders had been signaling their increased discontent—so, too, has it weakened the succession prospects of Brezhnev's protege Chernenko, one of detente's most vocal advocates in the Kremlin. The contender who presumably profited the most is Brezhnev's party deputy, Kirilenko, who in the past has voiced some reservations about detente. ☐

If the invasion is a success, those who might have argued against it probably will remain silent. But if the USSR is drawn into a long, costly military operation that damages Soviet interests on a global basis, the decision will be reexamined. There are already signs of second thoughts surfacing among second-level officials. The outcome of such a debate could have a significant impact on the makeup of the leadership, particularly in the post-Brezhnev era. ☐

A prolonged, costly conflict in Afghanistan might encourage younger elements in the Soviet establishment to press for a rejuvenation of the leadership. Unsatisfactory results in Afghanistan might also make KGB Chairman Andropov and Defense Minister Ustinov vulnerable and subject to removal at or before the next party congress in early 1981. Foreign Minister Gromyko might also be faulted for miscalculating the adverse worldwide reaction to the use of military force in Afghanistan. ☐

The Soviet Leadership Balance and Afghanistan

Is Brezhnev in Charge?

The Soviet move against the Amin regime in Afghanistan quickly generated some speculation that Brezhnev is no longer in control in Moscow. The implication is that Brezhnev must have opposed the action due to its repercussions for detente. Some senior Hungarian officials, including Kadar, reportedly share this view. They are also said to cite Moscow's renegeing on earlier Brezhnev commitments on oil deliveries as another indication that Brezhnev is not in charge. In our view, the Hungarians appear to have yielded to the East European proclivity for attributing any hardening of Kremlin policy to a shift in the Politburo balance.

One Soviet official commented that the normal flow of guidance and general information from Moscow had been sparse since mid-October, leading to believe that major changes were under way in the Soviet leadership. A few Soviet officials have even taken the line that the Soviet action in Afghanistan reflects the growing influence of "younger, more hawkish Politburo members [who] have become more involved in recent policy decisions." If there had been a shift in the power balance, it presumably would have been reflected in significant personnel changes in Moscow.

There were a few changes in the Soviet leadership at the party's Central Committee plenum on 27 November, but these changes did not alter the balance of power or threaten Brezhnev's leadership. The elevation of 74-year-old First Deputy Premier Tikhonov to full (voting) membership in the Politburo was, to the contrary, a plus for Brezhnev in at least two respects. It added another Brezhnev loyalist to the top leadership, and it dealt with a vacancy that otherwise might have been filled by a younger, more ambitious man. Tikhonov is directly in line for the top governmental post should Kosygin not recover from his heart attack, a circumstance that bespeaks near-term continuity and stability within the leadership.

The addition of Party Secretary Gorbachev to the Politburo as a candidate (nonvoting) member could also be interpreted as a move designed to preserve the delicate balance of power. Gorbachev's political connections are far from clear, but he and Suslov may be linked through association with the Stavropol region. A case could be made, therefore, that if pro- and anti-detente forces—led by Brezhnev and Suslov respectively—exist in the leadership, each side received a new member in the late November leadership appointments.

More importantly, in terms of reducing the threat to Brezhnev's primacy, Gorbachev's appointment foreclosed the opportunity for a more senior figure—for example, Ukrainian party chief Shcherbitskiy or Belorussian party boss Masharov—to move to Moscow to oversee agricultural matters in the Politburo. Such a move for either man would have strengthened his credentials as a possible successor to Brezhnev and, thus, might have contributed to a tilt against Brezhnev within the top leadership. Neither man increased his relative political importance at the November plenum, however, and Brezhnev was thus able to participate in the final phase of decisionmaking on Afghanistan with his political flanks secure.

Nor did Brezhnev's health prevent him from exercising his powers. He was active throughout the fall except for two weeks in mid-October.

Brezhnev maintained a very active schedule throughout November when the leadership probably reached at least a tentative decision to send Soviet armed forces against the Afghan insurgents.

the leadership presumably was sounding out Ambassador Dobrynin—who returned

[redacted]
home in early December—on likely US reactions to any Soviet move against the Amin regime and deliberating on other aspects of implementing the decision. [redacted]

Brezhnev dropped out of public view on 20 December.

[redacted]
Foreign Minister Gromyko made a highly unusual public apology for Brezhnev's absence from the luncheon on 21 December for Angolan President dos Santos, expressing Brezhnev's regrets that he could not attend the affair because of a catarrhal indisposition. Gromyko probably offered this explanation to head off another round of "Brezhnev is dead, or dying" rumors akin to those that had circulated two months earlier when Brezhnev failed to show up for any of the meetings with Syrian President Assad during the latter's visit to Moscow. [redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted] There is no reason to believe that he was out of touch with the developments on the Afghan front during this period. [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

Brezhnev's public activities during January add to the impression that he is very much at the center of things in Moscow. His name remained in the public media, which have carried a stream of messages on domestic issues from Brezhnev to various segments of the Soviet population. In addition, Brezhnev's role was highlighted when he, together with Suslov and Ponomarev, met in early January with French Communist leader Marchais in talks resulting in Marchais' press conference remarks defending the Afghan invasion. Moreover, Brezhnev was the only top leader who met with French National Assembly President Chaban-Delmas on 23 January before the latter cut

short his visit because of the Soviet actions against dissident physicist Andrey Sakharov. [redacted]

In addition, Brezhnev has taken the leading role among his colleagues on Afghan issues. His message of congratulation, published in *Pravda* on 29 December, makes Brezhnev the only Soviet leader who has gone on record, as yet, with an endorsement of Babrak Karmal's "election" as the new top man in Kabul. Brezhnev's interview in *Pravda* on 13 January set the standard for other Soviet leaders who have publicly defended the Soviet military intervention. In short, the evidence on hand strongly suggests that Brezhnev was actively involved in the Afghan decision and is prepared to defend it. Thus, while he may not be as vigorous today in directing and shaping the consensus as he was 10 to 15 years ago, we believe that on balance Brezhnev remains the dominant force and arbiter of Politburo interests. [redacted]

The Decision's Setting

Soviet dissatisfaction with the Khalq regime in Kabul had been growing during the past year. Soviet representatives in Kabul and elsewhere were exploring alternatives to the regime by May 1979, if not earlier. The collapse of the Moscow-backed intrigues by Afghan President Taraki against Prime Minister Amin in mid-September probably convinced the Soviet leaders that Amin could be toppled only by direct intervention and that planning for such action should commence. Brezhnev may have felt that he had a personal stake in all this, if only because he had met with Taraki—presumably to confer on his move against Amin—just days before Taraki launched his attempted coup. No doubt there was added pressure to do something as the subsequent months brought increased casualties among Soviet advisers, the attack on a Soviet military installation by Afghan pilots, and the failure of a Soviet-managed drive against the Afghan insurgents. [redacted]

There were no signs that Afghanistan was a controversial issue within the leadership during this period, but there were indications of mounting pressure for more militancy on other issues. On 12 October, for example, USA Institute Director Arbatov told [redacted] in Moscow that Brezhnev's proposals on European force reductions, made in East Berlin on

Interlocking Directorate of the Soviet Leadership

Government

Council of Ministers

Presidium of Supreme Soviet

Secretariat

Party

Politburo Date of

Full Member	Birth	Election	Brezhnev - General Secretary	Members = 0	Brezhnev - Chairman
Brezhnev	12/19/06	6/29/57		• Andropov - KGB	
Andropov	6/15/14	4/27/73			
Chernenko	9/24/11	11/28/78	Chernenko - Politburo Administration		• Gribshin
Gribshin	8/18/14	4/09/71	Moscow party boss	• Gromyko - Ministry of Foreign Affairs	
Gromyko	7/18/09	4/27/73			
Kirilenko	9/08/06	4/25/62	Kirilenko - Industry, Cadres	Kosygin - Chairman	• Kuryayev
Kosygin	2/21/04	5/04/60			
Kuryayev	1/12/12	4/09/71	Kazakhstan party boss	• Romanov	• Sacherbitakiy
Potche	2/07/36	4/08/65	Party Control Committee		
Romanov	2/07/23	3/06/76	Leningrad party boss		
Sacherbitakiy	2/17/18	4/09/71	Ukraine party boss		
Saslov	11/21/02	7/12/55	Saslov - Ideology, International Communism	Tikhonov - 1st Deputy Chairman	
Tikhonov	5/14/05	11/28/78		• Ustinov - Ministry of Defense	
Ustinov	10/22/08	3/06/76			
Candidate Member					
Anyev	5/10/23	3/06/76	Arz - ydzhan party boss	• Demichev - Ministry of Culture	
Demichev	1/03/18	11/01/64			Kaznetsov - 1st Deputy Chairman
Gorbachev	2/02/31	11/27/79	Gorbachev - Agriculture		• Masherev
Kaznetsov	2/13/01	10/03/77			
Masherev	2/13/18	4/08/66	Popomarev - Non-ruling Communist Parties		• Rashidov
Popomarev	1/17/05	5/19/72			
Rashidov	11/08/17	10/31/61	Uzbek party boss		
Shava-Jadze	01/25/28	11/28/78	Georgian party boss	• Solomentsev - RSFSR Premier	
Solomentsev	11/07/13	11/23/71			
			K. osov - Cadres		
			Dolgikh - Industry		
			Zimysalin - Propaganda, Ideology		
			Rusakov - Ruling Communist Parties		

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6 October, were opposed "not only by the military, but by other parts of the Soviet leadership as well." A crackdown on dissidents and human rights activists, which some of them called the most severe in 10 years, also began in mid-October—as did a moderate decline in Jewish emigration. One speaker at a Central Committee conference for media propagandists held in October or November is said to have questioned the virtues of the SALT II treaty, and according to [] the word "detente" all but disappeared from behind-closed-doors talks by "generals" in the last month of 1979. []

Premier Kosygin's []

[] may have made it easier for the Politburo to reach a decision on military intervention. Kosygin, while as tough-minded as any of the Politburo members in defending Soviet interests, would have been particularly concerned about the impact of a military intervention on Soviet relations with the West. He has long been a voice of caution in foreign affairs and probably would have argued against a decision that would involve Soviet military forces in a conflict beyond the USSR's borders. []

Kosygin displayed his displeasure with the USSR's military intervention in Czechoslovakia, for example, both before and after the fact and has never wholly subscribed to the so-called Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty. It may be noteworthy that, as mentioned above, the message of congratulations to the new Afghan regime on 29 December bore only Brezhnev's signature—a departure from normal practice. Both Brezhnev and Kosygin signed greetings to Amin in early December on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan friendship treaty. Both men also signed messages to Cuba on 1 January, to Kampuchea on 8 January, and to Prime Minister Gandhi on 11 January. []

Speeches by other Soviet leaders prior to the intervention revealed little about their attitudes on Afghanistan other than a general concern for events there. Party Secretary Suslov indicated on a few occasions during the past year that he considered Afghanistan one of several Third World states that had embarked "on the path of socialist construction," implying that he considered it a Communist state worth preserving.

Suslov has also been relatively positive in his assessment of the "steady development of revolutionary processes" in the world, and he gave the impression that he was more committed to supporting these movements than other Soviet leaders. []

Party Secretary Chernenko, speaking in Soviet Central Asia last August, complained about "imperialist attempts" to interfere in the internal affairs of "our neighbor, democratic Afghanistan" and to deprive the Afghan people of "their revolutionary gains." While this would seem to put him very close to Suslov on the question of the progressive nature of the Khalq regime in Kabul, his professed confidence that such efforts would fail suggests that Chernenko saw no reason at that time for any dramatic change in the level of Soviet involvement. []

Party Secretary Kirilenko said nothing about the Afghan situation during a speech two weeks later, and Shcherbitskiy was equally reticent on the situation in September and October. Both men, however, have repeatedly called for more vigilance against the intrigues of those who "nurture aggressive plans" inimical to Soviet interests. Similarly, Defense Minister Ustinov avoided commenting on the Afghan situation while emphasizing vigilance in his public remarks last fall. []

The silence of these three last fall on the Afghan situation may have been a matter of discretion rather than dissent, but we do know that the leadership was receiving divergent views from the Soviet staff [] in early September. [] reportedly argued that the USSR should maintain its support to Afghanistan regardless of the costs in men and material. [] however, is said to have opposed this view, stating that the political advantage gained from assisting Afghanistan did not justify the costs involved. The disagreement reportedly was referred to Moscow for resolution. []

Kirilenko, speaking for the leadership as a whole at the Kremlin ceremony on 6 November marking the Bolshevik Revolution, noted that Afghanistan was one of several countries that had recently embarked "on a path of independent development." This formulation,

the same that Foreign Ministry Gromyko used in his speech at the United Nations on 25 September, struck a middle ground between the remarks by Suslov and Chernenko on the one hand, and the "no comment" from Kirilenko, Shcherbitskiy, and Ustinov in their previous public statements. Both of these "official" statements appeared to avoid directly confronting the issue while the top leaders presumably reassessed their policy after Taraki's failure in his bid to oust Amin in mid-September. []

Such a reassessment probably was under way throughout October and plans for the military intervention must have been ready by late November. There is no sign that they were discussed at the Central Committee plenum on 27 November which, according to public accounts, was devoted to economic issues. []

During these closing months of 1979, the Soviet leadership gave no sign that Afghanistan was the weightiest issue they had under consideration. Soviet leaders were sending mixed signals on how Moscow intended to respond to a NATO decision on Theatre Nuclear Forces (TNF), raising the possibility that this issue was the major source of contention in the Kremlin at that time. In a speech on 23 November in Bonn, Gromyko said such a decision would destroy the basis for negotiations. He continued to be unyielding on this point even after the Warsaw Pact communique in early December stated that "the implementation of the decision," and not the decision itself, would destroy the basis for negotiations. Meanwhile, the deputy chief of the Soviet Central Committee's International Department, Vadim Zagladin, was quoted in the West German and Italian press on 19 and 25 November respectively as favoring the continuance of disarmament negotiations even if NATO decided in favor of TNF. []

The "A. Petrov" commentary on the Tehran hostages in *Pravda* on 5 December was another sign that the Soviet leadership was willing to take actions that might damage detente. The article attempted to justify the seizure of the hostages and in so doing signaled that a majority of the leadership was prepared to risk further deterioration in relations with the United States. []

An article in *Party Life* on 11 December suggests there might have been some resistance to this toughening trend. The article was not at all specific with regard to issues but it pointed out that after a decision is taken all Communists—including those with divergent views—must act as one person. It made a point of reminding Central Committee members that they are subject to this discipline and warned that "hardened factionaries" who ignore the will of the party deserve to be banished. []

After the Invasion

Against this background it is possible that the decision to use military force in Afghanistan was made with relative ease after the leadership endorsed a tougher, more assertive foreign policy line across the board. As in past crises, Brezhnev, who has always been sensitive to the prevailing mood of his colleagues, has established himself squarely in the forefront of this policy shift. He has heard rumors about his declining health and weakened authority, and his behavior since the invasion seems designed, at least in part, to make it known that he is in charge. He also may believe a firm position is necessary to cover his vulnerability from his past advocacy of detente. []

In his recent *Pravda* "interview" Brezhnev said that the decision on Afghanistan was not a simple one for the Soviet leaders. This could be interpreted as a hint that the Politburo was divided, but we think the more likely intent of that remark was to persuade the Soviet and world public that the Politburo, fully aware of the seriousness of its decision on Afghanistan, had felt that it had no alternative under the existing circumstances. []

The silence of the other top leaders suggests a desire to avoid getting too far out in front on this issue when the succession is so near. The speeches that are being given in connection with the 24 February elections for the republic legislative bodies are providing each of them a chance to comment on the world situation. While most give the impression of wanting to avoid saying anything that might jeopardize their positions in the post-Brezhnev era, they have fully supported the decision to invade Afghanistan and have blamed the United States for the disruption of detente, themes set forth in Brezhnev's interview. ☐

Implications for the Succession

The decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan almost certainly will have implications for the succession in Moscow. If the invasion sets things right—by Soviet standards—in short order, those who might have argued against it probably will remain silent, hoping to put as much distance as possible between this episode and the succession process. But a long, costly military operation that damages Soviet policy interests on a global basis might prompt a reexamination of the decision to move into Afghanistan. There already are signs of second thoughts about the wisdom of the invasion among second-level officials. Such a debate at the Politburo level would almost certainly lead to major changes in the top leadership, regardless of whether Brezhnev remained on the scene. ☐

Prolonged conflict in Afghanistan could work to the advantage of Shcherbitskiy, Romanov, and other relatively young leaders still waiting in the wings—by strengthening their case for a rejuvenation of the leadership. None of these young Turks are currently inclined to lead a charge against Brezhnev and the other Politburo "seniors," but they may press for several changes at the 26th Party Congress in early 1981. They almost certainly will argue that the time has come for Party Control Committee Chairman Pelshe, who is 81, to step down. They also may insist that Kosygin be replaced if he cannot resume his former responsibilities, and demand that the job be given to one of their number rather than Tikhonov. ☐

A protracted campaign in Afghanistan that does not produce the desired results but does complicate Soviet interests elsewhere in the world will also embarrass the three members of the Politburo who are charged with safeguarding national security—KGB Chairman Andropov, Defense Minister Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Gromyko. Andropov could be vulnerable on two counts—the failure of Taraki's move against Amin last September, which must have been KGB-sponsored, and the KGB's failure to get rid of Amin and install Babrak Karmal in Kabul before the Soviet troops went into action on 27 December. Andropov also would bear some responsibility for intelligence assessments that led the Politburo to expect a quick and easy success in Afghanistan. ☐

Ustinov would also be imperiled if his assessment of the military situation in Afghanistan before the coup on 27 December differed from the reality the Soviets are now facing. He would also have to accept some responsibility for the less than outstanding performance of the Soviet troops, and whatever discipline and morale problems develop within the Soviet armed forces in the months to come. Some Soviet leaders, for example, could ask Ustinov how the Soviet performance in Afghanistan squares with his repeated assurances that the Soviet armed forces are always ready to cope with any task they are given. Gromyko also could be faulted for having misjudged the worldwide response to the Soviet move against the Amin government. ☐

In the meantime, Brezhnev—no matter how much he agreed with the decision on Afghanistan—must feel some pain over the demise of detente. He also must realize that the collapse of detente has left him vulnerable to some extent—especially since some of his Politburo colleagues seem to have been questioning detente in private over the past few years. These leaders might use the recent events to make a case against Brezhnev's handling of foreign policy, which was one of his political strengths during the 1970s. ☐

In any event, Brezhnev is almost certain to ease up on his past efforts to improve Chernenko's standing within the leadership. Indeed, Chernenko may have suffered something of a setback, if only because he has been the potential successor most supportive of detente and further steps to curb the arms race, at a time when a number of his Politburo colleagues have been expressing their doubts more openly during the past year or more. ☐

By contrast, Kirilenko may be able to use the increased international tension to argue the need for an experienced hand at the helm. Moscow party chief Grishin may also benefit, if only as a compromise candidate who would be acceptable to a majority of the Politburo, including kingmaker Suslov. Suslov reportedly is determined to block Kirilenko's candidacy, and his influence has probably increased with the intervention. On the other hand, Suslov probably would put the regime's needs ahead of his own preferences if the succession issue had to be resolved at a moment of high tension in the world. ☐

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